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ABSTRACT

Education students planning to teach in rural areas need, but do not receive, specialized training. Among differences encountered by rural teachers are professional isolation and limited inservice training; assignment to more subjects, more grade levels, and more extracurricular activities; lower budgets and salaries; inadequate materials; less pressured environment; greater cooperation; more student involvement; and more interaction among students, parents, and staff. A literature review suggests that teacher training programs are unresponsive to needs of prospective rural teachers and that research interest in rural education is limited. Suggestions for preparation of rural teachers include cultivating awareness of cultural, social, and economic conditions of rural areas through student teaching/practicums in nonmetropolitan areas; preparing future teachers to work with broader age ranges in multigrade classrooms and to teach several subjects; and encouraging faculty to conduct research in rural education. A comparative list of rural-urban differences in the work environment and a chart showing emphasis given by public institutions to topics applicable to rural teaching are included. (LFL)

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EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE PREPARATION

OF

TEACHERS FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

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EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE PREPARATION

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The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) predicts that 1.65 million new school teachers will be hired over the next eight years (Jacobson, 1985). Due to the continuing urban to rural migration flow since the mid-1970's (Beale, 1975), an increased number of education graduates will be accepting teaching positions in nonmetropolitan areas. Teachers who serve predominately rural constituencies make up a sizable portion of America's educators. Based on NCES statistics (1980), over two-thirds of the nation's public school systems are in areas designated as rural and enroll about one-third of all school aged children.

Teaching in a Rural School

The basics of instruction are essentially the same for teachers in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Because there are important demands of the rural instructional setting not experienced in most city schools, education students who plan careers in rural areas need some specialized training. Rural teachers are generally more isolated from ongoing developments in their field. Secondary teachers typically teach a wider range of courses than their metropolitan counterparts and are expected to take on added extra curricular assignments. Elementary teachers are likely to teach two or more grade levels in the same classroom. Rural teachers are apt to receive limited or sporadic inservice training. Budgets are often much lower per capita than those for most urban or suburban schools; it is not unusual for supplies and materials to be either outdated or inadequate; and teacher salaries are about 20 percent below the

the level for metropolitan teachers (Barker, 1985; Hoyt, 1981; Muse, 1979/80).

Sher (1977) has indicated that other features uniquely distinguish rural schools from urban schools. These include a slower paced, less pressured environment; a greater spirit of cooperation among students and staff; more opportunities for student leadership and involvment, and more formal interaction among students, staff, and parents. A more detailed list of characteristics compiled by Nachtigal (1982, p. 270) substantiates the claim that living and working in a rural environment differs considerably from living in an urban setting (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Rural	Urban
Personal/tightly linked	Impersonal/loosely coupled
Generalists	Specialists
Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
Nonbureacratic	Bureaucratic
Verbal communication	Written memos
Who said it	What's said
Time measured by seasons of the year	Time measured by time clock
Traditional values	Liberal values
Entrepreneur	Corporate labor force
Made do/respond to environment	Rational planning to control environment
Self-sufficiency	Leave problem solving to experts
Poorer (Spendable income)	Richer (Spendable income)
Less formal education	More formal education
Smaller/less density	Larger/greater density

Taken from Nachtigal, (1982). Rural Education in Search of a Better Way, p. 270.

A Review of Research on Preservice Training for Rural Teachers

A review of the literature suggests that teacher training programs in our nation's colleges and universities are overwhelmingly unresponsive to the needs of prospective rural teachers (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Horn, 1985; Massey and Crosby, 1983; Muse and Stonehocker, 1979; and Nelson, 1983). Although there are a large number of students who attend rural schools, few institutions of higher education have teacher training programs which include components

designed specifically to help prepare teachers for rural areas. Some institutions have indicated they would never develope such an effort because it would be inappropriate for them to do so (Horn, 1981). One reason is that many large universities and colleges are located in metropolitan centers. Faculty members at these institutions conduct research and maintain interests in large city schools which are conveniently located, rather than traveling to distant, isolated rural schools. Results of a survey by Muse (1978) reported that "no more than six universities in the nation offered courses that might be of prospective value to rural teachers" (page 5). Sher (1977) stated that only a handful of teacher education programs provided special training to prepare teachers for rural schools.

The literature does identify between 20 to 25 institutions which uniquely attempt to train teachers for rural schools (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Helge, 1982; Hoyt, 1981; Miller and Sidebottom, 1985). Guenther and Weible (1983) report writing letters to 25 colleges and universities identified in the literature as having some form of special preparation program for rural schools. Their results were discouraging. Of the institutions which responded, only one actually had an ongoing program. The other colleges/universities, although recognizing the need for a separate preparation, either never had a special program in actual practice or had discontinued the program. According to Horn (1985), institutional support and commitment to many special preparation programs is weak, often because the interest in developing and conducting a special program for rural school teachers is maintained by a single faculty member in the college.

Findings from a Recent Survey

Research interest in rural education on the part of education faculty members is also limited. In a 1985 study, Barker and Beckner gathered information

from 306 of the nation's public four-year colleges and universities. Based on responses from education deans and chairpersons, only 1.9 percent of education faculty members focused their research and/or writing interests on rural education. In fact, in over two-thirds of the institutions, there was not a single faculty member researching or writing in the area. Only 93 of the 306 schools had faculty members pursuing rural interests, and in 59 of these, the number was limited to one or two. Similarly, over 70 percent of the institutions neither provided special topics nor a course(s) in the preparation of teachers for a rural setting. The vast majority of the 87 institutions which did include rural education as a part of their curriculum did so only as a subset of a more general course. Only nine institutions actually reported a course(s) devoted solely to the study of rural or small schools.

Although very few teacher education programs offer coursework designed specifically to prepare teachers for rural careers and few education faculty members conduct research in rural education, the Barker and Beckner study did find that many education deans and chairpersons recognize a need to give greater attention to rural education. Forty-eight percent of those surveyed agreed that teaching in a small rural school was different than teaching in a large urban school and indeed needed a different preparation. In addition, 34 percent felt their institution should make provisions to train prospective rural teachers. Furthermore, it appears that many teacher education programs--as a part of their regular curriculum--do address some issues deemed to be uniquely important to rural educators. From an investigation of the literature, Barker and Beckner compiled a list of areas of teacher preparation especially beneficial to instructors in rural schools (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Guenther and Weible, 1983; Horn, 1985; Meier and Edington, 1983; Nachtigal, 1982; Sher,

1977). Table 1 reports responses by education deans and chairpersons as to the degree each of these 10 areas was emphasized at their institution. Responses were based on a scale of "1" to "5" where "1" represented "no emphasis given" and "5" represented "great emphasis given." Responses suggest that many public supported teacher training institutions do include aspects of prepartion which directly apply toward preparing teachers for rural areas. This is true regarding provision of practical methods courses and for prospective teachers to recognize and properly refer learning disabled, special education, and exceptional children. Most programs are also geared to help future teachers understand the role of the community and to be prepared to teach with limited resources and funding. Most programs fail to place much emphasis on field experiences or practicums in rural settings. The same is true in terms of preparing teachers for multigrade instruction in the same classroom and in offering coursework in rural sociology or rural education. Also, limited emphasis is given to providing skills in guidance and counseling.

Conclusion

Previous research has criticized colleges and departments of education for failing to give proper attention to the training of prospective rural teachers. While it is true that the preparation of rural teachers should be given increased attention, a unique preparation program is not possible for most institutions. Constraints of money, time, and expert personnel make it very difficult to expand present teacher education programs. Dwindling financial resources for education and research tend to diminish hopes for immediate improvement.

Rural educators should recognize that teacher training for rural schools is occurring in many ways at many institutions--usually as a part of the

TABLE 1

AREAS OF TEACHER EDUCATION GIVEN ATTENTION AT PUBLIC TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS AS PERCEIVED BY COLLEGE OF EDUCATION DEANS AND CHAIRPERSONS, 1985. REPORTED ON A SCALE OF "1" TO "5" WHERE "1" REPRESENTS "NO EMPHASIS GIVEN" AND "5" REPRESENTS "GREAT EMPHASIS GIVEN."

AREAS OF PREPARATION	NO EMPHASIS 1		LITTLE EMPHASIS 2		SOME EMPHASIS 3		CONSIDERABLE EMPHASIS 4		GREAT EMPHASIS 5	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Practical Methods Courses	3	1.0	4	1.3	10	3.4	75	25.1	207	69.2
Learning to teach with limited resources	2	0.7	26	8.6	116	38.7	114	38.0	42	14.0
More preparation in guidance and counseling of students	8	2.7	56	19.0	139	47.1	72	24.4	20	6.8
Better preparation in two or more subject matter fields	3	1.0	23	7.8	70	23.8	117	39.8	81	27.6
Exposure to a course in rural sociology	99	33.0	95	31.7	69	23.0	31	10.3	6	2.0
Ability to teach two or more grade levels in the same room	66	22.1	95	31.9	88	29.5	38	12.8	11	3.7

TABLE 1 (Continued)

AREAS OF PREPARATION	NO EMPHASIS 1		LITTLE EMPHASIS 2		SOME EMPHASIS 3		CONSIDERALBE EMPHASIS 4		GREAT EMPHASIS 5	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Training to recognize and appropriately refer exceptional children	2	0.7	5	1.7	40	13.4	125	41.8	127	42.4
Training that helps teachers understand the role of the community in American Society	2	0.7	17	5.7	86	28.7	124	41.3	71	23.6
Practicum or student teaching in a rural setting	66	22.0	55	18.3	93	31.0	60	20.0	26	8.7
Course work directly related to rural school teaching	89	29.7	89	29.7	83	27.7	33	11.0	6	2.0

regular teacher education program. More can be done. Education students who plan to teach in rural and small schools must be made aware of the cultural, social, and economic conditions of rural areas. This can best be accomplished by providing opportunities for student teaching or practicums in nonmetropolitan schools. Prospective students can thereby experience the close relationship that exists between a rural community and its school. Another effort, which will not require significant changes to the curriculum, is to prepare future teachers to work with broader age ranges of students. This will enable them to successfully meet the needs of students in multigrade classrooms. Emphasis should also be given to preparing generalists who can teach in several subject areas. Finally, education deans and chairpersons can encourage more of their faculty members to conduct research in rural education. This is an area which beckons inquiry and investigation.

It is encouraging to see any efforts being made to improve the preparation of teachers for rural schools, and so it should be. Rural schools serve one-third of our nation's students. They deserve recognition and assistance.

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